

# Absent in the courtroom, omnipresent on the wall.

## Femininity of Justice and her sisters of virtue in nineteenth century Belgian legal iconography.

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An easily forgotten aspect of legal history is the abundance of women in its iconography throughout the ages, as opposed to the absence of female judges, lawyers and the like. In the male-dominated world of nineteenth-century justice, these sculpted and painted women represented not uncommonly the very core of what justice aimed to be. First and foremost, no doubt, there is the obvious and famous Justice or *Justitia*. Regarding her, Wolfgang Schild noted “*Wer denkt denn heute noch beim Anblick einer solchen Statue an einem Gerichtsgebäude daran, daß sie als eine Frauenfigur dargestellt ist? Zugleich haben die obigen Ausführungen deutlich gemacht, wie abstrakt die Redensweise von „der Weiblichkeit“ der Justitia eigentlich ist.*”<sup>1</sup> Justitia does not stand alone, as she is often accompanied or replaced by her “sisters of virtue”: Law, Fidelity, Truth, Liberty, Fortitude,...

In this paper, I give a select overview of the role these women played, and the traditionalism or modernity in which they were used and perceived in Belgium during the long nineteenth century. These facts will be compared to the neighbouring countries of France and the Netherlands. In those rare cases where artists used a male personification of the law, as Juliaan Dillens did for his statue intended for the Brussels *Palais de Justice*, the popular and artistic debate surrounding these decisions can tell us more about the contemporary and evolving view on women in legal iconography.

The gender of these personifications has a fairly simple ground, as will be shown. However, in some of the justice related art works, the femininity of women was explicitly used, for instance in those cases where the (female) personification of the state gives birth to a constitution, or where a mother figure of Justice carefully leads a child, representing mankind.

Next is the question as to how and to what degree women were depicted as criminals and/or victims in nineteenth century genre painting. Both historical genre paintings dealing with romantic or literary figures as contemporary subjects are taken into account. Methodologically, *iconographic prosopography* sheds more light, both qualitative and quantitative, on these matters.

This paper is framed within a broader iconological research of justice related art, which tries to find out how traditional this visual language was in the ever changing legal landscape of the Southern Low Countries during the long nineteenth century.

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<sup>1</sup> Schild W., *Bilder von Recht und Gerechtigkeit*, Köln, Dumont, 1995